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Item 139 of the preliminary list*
Pattern of conferences

Pattern of conferences

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report contains information on procedures and activities relating to the pattern of conferences in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 71/262 and other relevant mandates. The report begins with a brief overview, which is followed by sections presenting the results and developments recorded in meetings management and documents management in 2016, together with cost-efficiency initiatives and cross-cutting issues. It ends with a set of conclusions, recommendations and proposed next steps. Information is summarized to the extent possible in order to keep the report succinct and within the word limit. Electronic versions of the documents of the Committee on Conferences are available from https://coc.dgacm.org.

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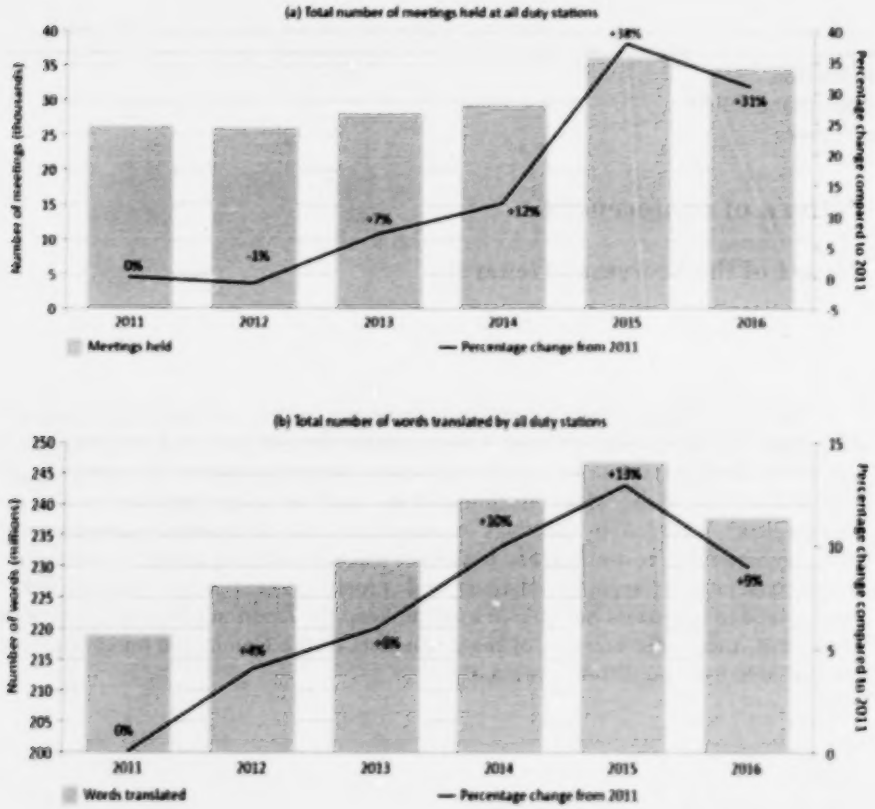
I. Introduction

1. The expansion of the role of the United Nations as a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of their common goals has been accompanied by a correlated increase in the meetings and documentation workload of the Secretariat.

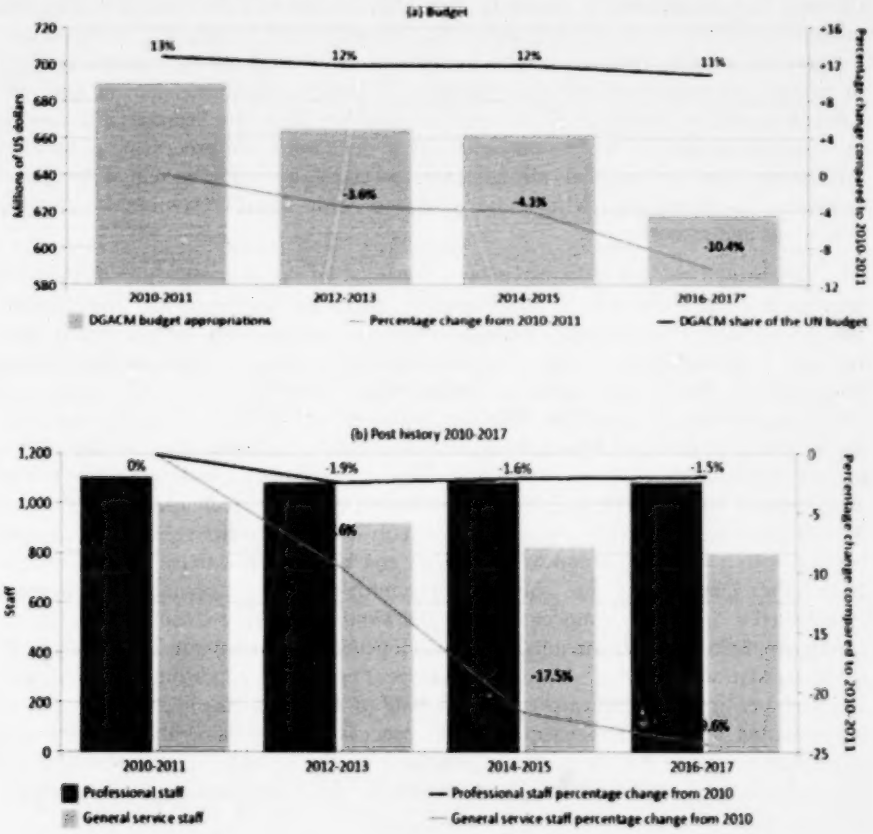
Figure I
Number of meetings held and words translated, 2011-2016



2. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management serviced almost 35,000 meetings and translated 246 million words in 2016, numbers that remain practically unchanged from 2015 and represent a 31 per cent and 9 per cent increase, respectively, from 2011 (see fig. I).[1] In spite of the workload increase, there has been a constant reduction, since 2011, in the Department's biennial budget appropriations, including through the reduction of 59 posts since 2010-2011 (see fig. II). This has presented the Secretariat's conference-management operations at Headquarters and in Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi with sizeable challenges, which it has been able to meet through various measures, described below.

[1] See para. 11 below, explaining the choice of 2011 as the base year.

Figure II
Departmental budget and posts, bienniums 2010-2011 to 2016-2017



3. The Secretariat has responded and will continue to respond to these challenges and make every effort to absorb the increasing workload by seeking ways to increase the productivity and efficiency of its conference services at all four duty stations through a strategy of continuous improvement and modernization. This strategy is already bearing fruit. In 2016, the Secretariat managed to maintain or improve its overall performance in key areas.

4. The strategy is based on strengthening advance planning, leveraging technology, optimizing language capacity, streamlining workflows and harmonizing systems to achieve further efficiency gains while maintaining high quality. In this way, the Secretariat will continue its efforts to provide high-quality services at all four duty stations at the same or lower cost and within the mandated time frames, to the extent possible, notwithstanding reduced resources.

5. Key components include the mainstreaming of information technology solutions in all aspects of conference management, concerted efforts to replenish, rejuvenate and motivate the workforce, and the modernization of working methods and procedures. In 2016, this has involved further developing in-house customized information technology tools and their implementation in all four duty stations; restructuring language support functions, adjusting working methods and updating standard operating procedures to reflect the new, fully electronic workflow; expanding

the pools of qualified freelance translators and developing quality control protocols to increase external processing capacity and ensure quality; harmonizing the systems and procedures used at all duty stations in order to increase the potential for workload sharing; and standardizing reporting templates to improve the comparability and usefulness of data for monitoring and evaluation and hence for ongoing improvement. Several innovations were also piloted in 2016, in recruitment testing, the management of contractual translation and the utilization of internal capacity. Also, in line with General Assembly resolution 71/262 of 23 December 2016, the Secretariat is seeking to rebalance its internal professional capacity in documentation processing to improve efficiencies and ensure that all language services are afforded equal treatment according to their specificities and provided with equally favourable working conditions and resources.

6. These and the other improvements outlined in the present report reflect the Secretariat's commitment to fulfilling its mandate for ensuring the quality, timeliness, cost-effectiveness, sustainability and accessibility of the conference services it provides in a budget-constrained and -tightening environment. Future progress will require the further mainstreaming of best practices and harmonized operating procedures across the four duty stations, which has been under way since the adoption of General Assembly resolution 57/283, including the full integration of the automation tools used by the language services. Following an earlier alignment of policies and information and communications technology systems, all duty stations have actively engaged in the current comprehensive round of deeper harmonization and integration of operations and business practices. To that end, in 2015, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management established a Steering Group chaired by the Under-Secretary-General. The Group, acting in three parallel streams, has developed and promulgated more than 70 recommendations aimed at harmonizing business processes, reporting methodologies and key performance indicators. Almost half of the recommendations have been implemented already. The harmonization process will enhance the delivery and effectiveness of the policy guidance provided by the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management to all duty stations, in accordance with Assembly resolution 57/283, sect. II.B, para. 7.

II. Meetings management

A. Draft biennial calendar of conferences and meetings for 2018-2019

7. At its substantive session, in September 2017, the Committee on Conferences will review the draft revised calendar of conferences and meetings for 2018-2019 (A/AC.172/2017/L.2) and transmit its recommendations to the General Assembly in its report for 2017 (to be issued as A/72/32, annexes I and II).

B. Requests for exceptions to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243

8. Requests to meet during the main part of the seventy-second session of the General Assembly have been received from six bodies. In accordance with established practice, the requests will be reviewed by the Committee on Conferences, which will make a recommendation to the Assembly.

C. Intersessional departures

9. The Committee on Conferences approved eight requests for intersessional departures.

D. Utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities by United Nations organs

1. Utilization of conference-servicing resources by all calendar bodies

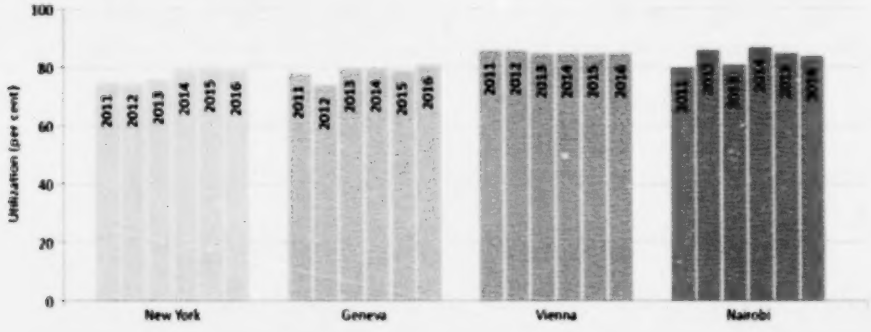
10. The total number of meetings held at the four duty stations in 2016 decreased by 5 per cent compared with 2015, from 36,316 to 34,604. The 2015 figure reflects an exceptional spike in the volume of meetings, generated by the United Nations summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda, the events held that year to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, the adoption of General Assembly resolution 68/268, which added 20.6 weeks of meetings of the human rights treaty bodies per year, and a very intense programme of meetings on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in preparation for the signing of the Paris Agreement in November 2015.

11. To provide a full picture of the utilization of conference-servicing resources, the present report continues to use the methodology developed in 2015 that broadens the scope of reporting beyond the core sample to report on the formal meetings of all calendar bodies at all four duty stations using a six-year cycle (see fig. III). This methodology also makes it possible to address underutilization more broadly and to achieve greater efficiencies across all intergovernmental bodies.

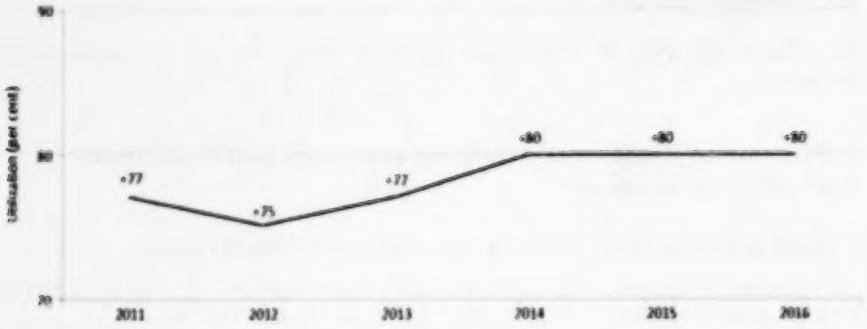
12. The overall utilization of allocated meeting services in 2016 was 80 per cent, as in 2015. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management continued to work closely with the secretariats of calendar bodies on refining their programmes of work and adjusting their interpretation requirements, in order to minimize the number of cancellations and number of minutes lost as a result of the late start or early ending of meetings, the two main factors affecting service utilization.

Figure III
Utilization of conference-servicing resources, 2011-2016

(a) By duty station



(b) Globally



2. Intergovernmental bodies for which the utilization of meeting services was below 80 per cent

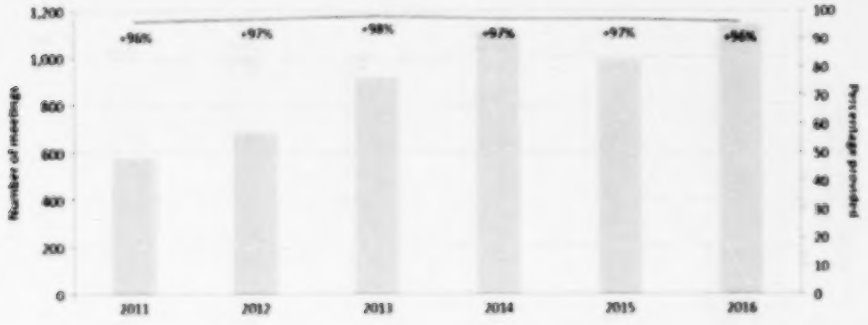
13. Pursuant to paragraph 14 of General Assembly resolution 71/262, the Chair of the Committee on Conferences sent letters in June 2017 to the presiding officers of each of the 14 calendar bodies that have consistently utilized less than 80 per cent of their allocated meeting services for each of the past six years, drawing their attention to the issue. The letters contained tailored recommendations for achieving the optimum utilization of meeting services and for employing additional measures to make their use of conference services more efficient. The letters were followed up with further practical support from the Secretariat.

14. With the inclusion of bodies outside the core sample in the analysis, the number of bodies whose average utilization of meeting services has been below the benchmark of 80 per cent for the past six years has increased substantially, to 42 (of those, 20 are based in New York, 19 in Geneva and 3 in Vienna).

3. Provision of interpretation services to meetings of bodies entitled to meet "as required"

15. As shown in figure IV, in New York, the number of requests for interpretation and the number of meetings provided with interpretation have both doubled since 2011, increasing by 15 per cent and 13 per cent, respectively in 2016, compared with 2015. All requests for meeting rooms were met, and all but a fraction of the requests for interpretation services were fulfilled. In Geneva, the only body entitled to meet "as required" is the Human Rights Council, and all its requests were met. There are no bodies in Vienna or Nairobi that are entitled to meet "as required".

Figure IV
Provision of interpretation services to meetings of bodies entitled to meet "as required" in New York, 2011-2016



E. Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States

16. Figure V shows the provision of interpretation services to regional and other major groupings of Member States at the four duty stations from 2011 to 2016. In 2016, all requests for meeting rooms were met. It must be emphasized that regional and other major groupings of Member States are provided with interpretation on an "if available" basis only, by using services released from cancelled meetings or when excess capacity is available. Consequently, the provision of interpretation to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States is inversely proportional to provision of interpretation calendar meetings and to meetings of bodies entitled to meet "as required".

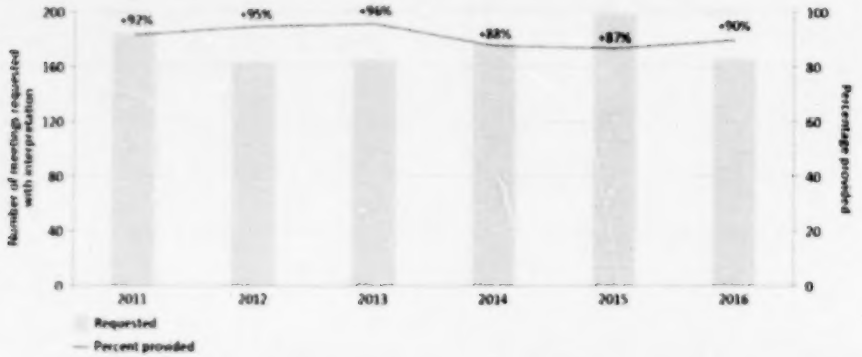
17. New York registered a 17 per cent decrease in the number of requests for interpretation and 14 per cent decrease in the number of meetings provided with interpretation in 2016, the latter owing to the increased needs of "as required" bodies. Geneva, for its part, experienced an increase of 4 per cent in the number of requests for interpretation, mostly in preparation for the fourteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Fewer requests were accommodated, however, due to the increased number of calendar meetings mandated by the General Assembly.

18. Vienna received no requests, while in Nairobi all of the 11 requests for interpretation services for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States were met.

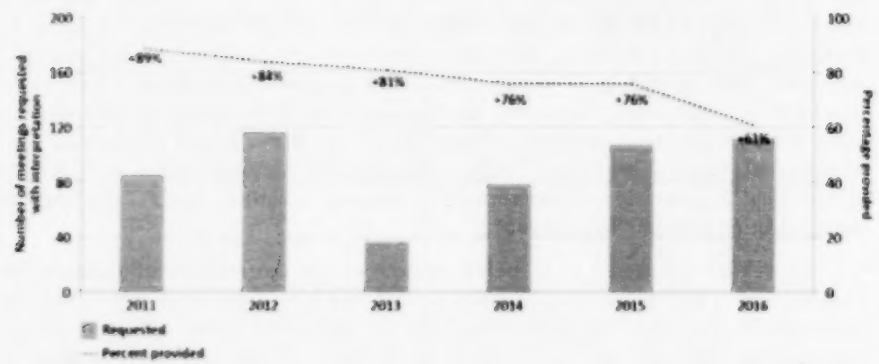
Figure V

Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States in New York and Geneva, 2011-2016

(a) New York



(b) Geneva



F. Utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi

19. In 2016, in accordance with several resolutions of the General Assembly, including paragraph 23 of resolution 70/9, all meetings of Nairobi-based bodies were held in Nairobi, in conformity with the headquarters rule.

G. Utilization of the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa

20. Thanks to sustained marketing efforts that strategically target local organizations (primarily United Nations agencies, international organizations, government entities, embassies, private and public bodies and key hospitality industry representatives based in Addis Ababa) and regional and international clients, the average occupancy of the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa increased to 93 per cent in 2016 from 84 per cent in 2014 and 2015. This marked a significant reversal of a previous trend of underutilization, in which levels had reached as low as 53 per cent in 2011.

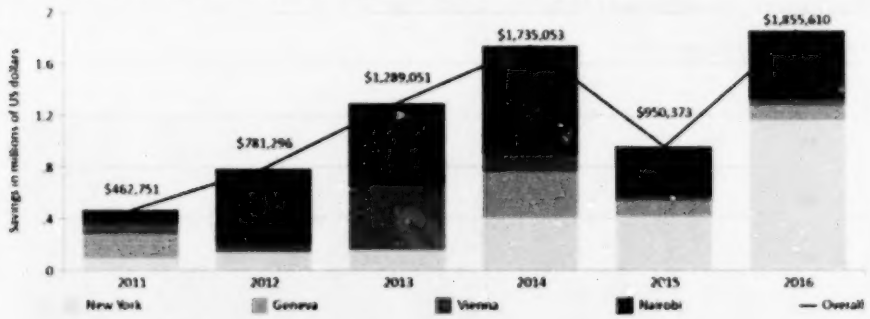
H. Meetings held away from established headquarters

21. All duty stations applied the integrated global management rule where appropriate. Continued efforts were made to build up capacity for coordinating and servicing such meetings in the most efficient way through the expansion of the pool of trained staff members. In the process of assembling a servicing team, consideration was given not only to proximity, but also to the quality of services, hidden administrative costs, replacement costs and expertise.

22. In 2016, the application of the integrated global management rule resulted in notional savings of $1,855,610 for both regular budget and extrabudgetary activities (see fig. VI), considerably more than in 2015, mainly as a result of the higher number of conferences held away from established headquarters in 2016 (35) than in 2015 (27). These notional savings were accrued to host countries or other international or regional organizations that requested assistance from the United Nations. It should be noted that the additional workload of coordinating and servicing such meetings is usually not reflected as additional costs to the United Nations.

Figure VI

Notional savings from the application of the integrated global management rule in servicing meetings away from established headquarters



I. Summary records, verbatim records and digital recordings

23. The number of verbatim records produced by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management remained relatively high, at 435, compared with 439 in 2015 and 438 in 2014. While the number of meetings entitled to verbatim records remained relatively stable, their length increased together with the number of words to be recorded in the verbatim records. The number of summary records produced in New York was 328 in 2016, compared with 419 in 2015 and 315 in 2014. In Geneva, the increase in meetings entitled to summary records drove up the number of such records produced there from 499 in 2014, to 580 in 2015 and 622 in 2016.

24. Digital recordings are available to any meeting body at its request. Three Vienna-based bodies entitled to written records used digital recordings in 2016, and two of them decided to discontinue the production of written records. There were more than 6,800 downloads from the system in 2016, compared with slightly more than 5,000 in 2015.

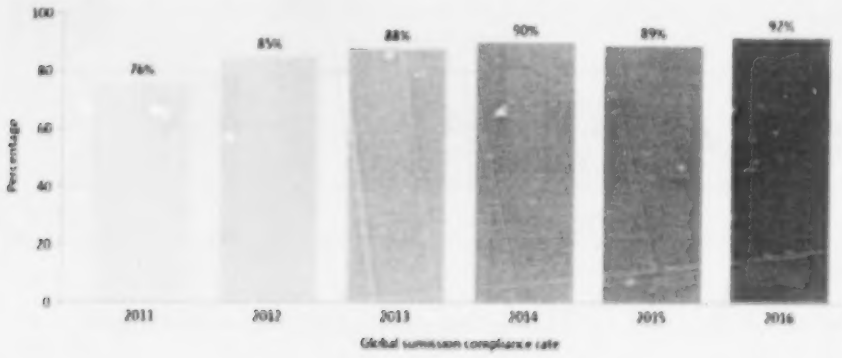
III. Documents management

A. Timely submission, processing and issuance of documents

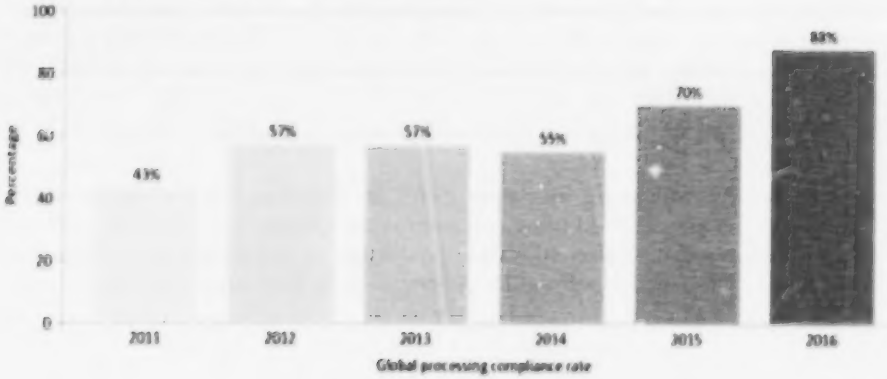
25. Globally, all key performance indicators of documents management were considerably improved in 2016, as shown in figure VII. The definitions and templates for statistical reporting on document submission, processing and issuance compliance were harmonized across all duty stations to expedite monitoring and the early identification of areas for improvement. In comparison with previous years, submission compliance — that is, compliance by author departments with the deadlines for submitting slotted documents for processing (editing, translation and formatting) — increased in 2016 by 16 per cent compared with 2011. Processing compliance — that is, compliance by the Secretariat with the four-week processing deadlines for documents that are submitted on time and within word limits — increased significantly, to 88 per cent, up from 70 per cent in 2015 and 43 per cent in 2011, and issuance compliance — that is, compliance with mandated issuance deadlines of six weeks (or four weeks in the case of several United Nations organs, funds and programmes) before the documents are scheduled for consideration — also increased significantly, to 79 per cent, from 67 per cent in 2015 and 44 per cent in 2011.

Figure VII
Documents management indicators, 2011-2016

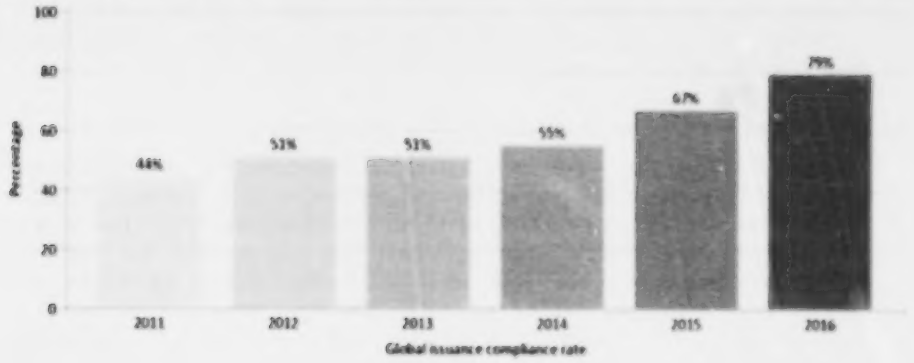
(a) Timely submission



(b) Timely processing of slotted documents



(c) Timely issuance of slotted documents



26. It should be noted that the submission compliance rates shown in figure VI refer to submission by an agreed slot date, not necessarily submission in accordance with the mandated deadlines of 10 or 8 weeks before consideration. Globally, in 2016, only 79 per cent of documents were submitted to the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management for processing in accordance with the mandated time frames, marking a decrease of 4 per cent from 2015. The improvement of 12 per cent in timely issuance in 2016 was achieved thanks to conference management staff working closely with all author departments and to the language services meeting more processing deadlines or even reducing turnaround time.

27. As in previous years, external factors beyond the control of author departments prevented some documents from being submitted for processing within the mandated time frames. This was particularly true for documents prepared for consideration by the Fifth Committee. To address the perennial challenges posed by Fifth Committee documentation, the Secretariat continued its efforts for the third year in a row to ensure close collaboration between the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, the author departments and the secretariats of the Committee and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions. As a result of these efforts and the extraordinary work of the language services, 69 of the 104 reports slotted for the main session of the Fifth Committee in 2016 were issued six weeks before consideration. This was achieved even though only 32 reports had been received 10 weeks before consideration and th. average length of reports amounted to nearly 19,000 words. Since the adoption of the International Public Sector Accounting Standards, the workload related to the reports of the Board of Auditors has increased drastically over the past three years: by 13 per cent in 2015 and 46 per cent in 2016 compared to the first annual reporting cycle in 2014.

1. Challenges in the processing of high-priority non-slotted documents

28. The dynamic nature of the intergovernmental process generates a considerable number of unplanned, high-priority documents for processing, which has a heavy impact on the Secretariat's capacity to meet deadlines. In New York, for example, the volume of the unplanned workload in 2016 continued to exceed 50 per cent of the total workload (56 per cent in 2016, up from 55 per cent in 2015 and 51 per cent in 2014).

29. In this respect, the processing of reports of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions posed a particular challenge at

Headquarters. During the main part of the seventy-first session of the General Assembly, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management received 42 reports from the Advisory Committee, totalling 185,387 words, which it succeeded in processing in an average of three calendar days and issuing at least 24 hours prior to their consideration.

2. Waivers of word limits

30. In New York, the proportion of Secretariat documents that exceeded the word limits was 26 per cent in 2016, up from 18 per cent in 2015, adding 1.78 million words to the workload. Meanwhile, the 15 per cent of non-Secretariat documents in that category represented a further additional 1.18 million words for processing. Author departments have been encouraged to consider reducing the volume of the reports they generate by seeking alternative means to share information. At the United Nations Office at Geneva, on the other hand, all slotted pre-session documents have been submitted in full compliance with the word limits since 2012, and waivers were granted in 2016 for only 10 reports of the Joint Inspection Unit. At the United Nations Office at Vienna, with the exception of legal documents that are not subject to a word limit, nearly full compliance was achieved. At the United Nations Office at Nairobi, the compliance rate was 88 per cent, with only three documents exceeding the word limits.

B. Simultaneous distribution of documents

31. Simultaneous distribution of documents is one of the pillars of multilingualism that the Department makes every effort to achieve without exception. In 2016, a new reporting template and definitions were introduced for compiling simultaneous distribution statistics that will facilitate the monitoring of this indicator. The simultaneous distribution compliance rate in 2016 was 99 per cent in New York and Nairobi and 100 per cent in Vienna. Strict enforcement of the mandate and accelerated processing increased simultaneous distribution in Geneva from 50 per cent in 2011 to 80 per cent in 2016. Instructions from intergovernmental bodies and author departments that some language versions should be issued before the others were ready, as was the case with a number of Human Rights Council documents, account largely for the incidence of non-simultaneous distribution.

C. Digitization and uploading of important older United Nations documents

32. As of February 2017, 409,556 documents have been digitized, catalogued and made available, representing some 13.7 per cent of the 3 million documents identified as important and in urgent need of digitization, up from 12.8 per cent in April 2016.

D. Innovation in documents processing in 2016

33. The use of the in-house designed computer-assisted translation tool, eLUNa, increased at all duty stations and across all language combinations by 65 per cent in 2016. At the end of the year, the tool was being used by approximately 1,200 internal, temporary and contractual translators and verbatim reporters, who all enjoyed access to the same document repository and terminology database. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia adopted eLUNa in 2016, and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean has requested to do

the same in 2017. Feedback from this large pool of users is channelled into ongoing improvements, which in 2016 included the integration of a powerful tool for making advanced, customized searches in the global document repository. In addition, a new interface for editors was developed for deployment in mid-2017. Like the translation interface, the editing interface automatically verifies the use of the official terminology contained in the UNTERM terminology portal and identifies which parts of a document are recycled from previously issued documents. This will allow editors to process documents more efficiently and focus on improving the quality and readability of the originals.

34. The wealth of information that eLUNa places at its users' fingertips helps to not only ensure quality and consistency, but also reduce document processing time, since most reference searches are automated. The strategy pursued by the Department in this area envisions a gradual phasing out of a reference-by-default mode of operation and its replacement by automated reference and on-demand reference with quality assurance based on the document categorization. Thanks to such automation, several unencumbered reference assistant posts in the Documentation Division were abolished in the budget for 2018-2019, while all encumbered posts were reassigned to new language support functions with high added value, such as editorial support, optical character recognition, transliteration of proper names in Arabic, Chinese and Russian, and on-demand research services. In Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, the reprofiling will have to be implemented in a phased manner, largely owing to the numbers of encumbered posts in the reference units, as well as the need to review the categorization of the documents.

1. Consolidation of UNTERM as the global United Nations terminology portal

35. Access to official terminology records is key for the quality, consistency and efficiency of the work of the United Nations languages services. In 2016, UNTERM was brought under the umbrella of the gText project and incorporated in the eConference portal, where it is fully integrated into the automated referencing function of eLUNa. Work to migrate terminology from all the duty stations and regional commissions into UNTERM continued, with the ultimate goal of achieving global harmonization. Geneva's terminology database was migrated in 2015. Work to migrate Vienna's terminology began in 2016 and is expected to be completed in 2017, together with the migration of the databases of Nairobi, Beirut and Santiago. The redeployment of terminologists and terminology assistants to the language services in New York in 2015 has yielded excellent results in terms of aligning terminology production with users' needs, accelerating record creation and improving the quality of terminology records. UNTERM is quickly asserting itself as the primary source for United Nations terminology referencing for both staff and the general public, with over 4 million human searches logged in 2016, an increase of 37 per cent compared with 2015.

2. Optimization of contractual translation management

36. The previous model of contractual translation management in New York made it difficult to align contracting decisions with in-house capacity and the particular expertise required. A system whereby the individual translation services assign contractual work into their language was piloted in two services at the end of 2016. The pilot revealed two main gains: an improved utilization of existing internal capacity and improved quality assurance. In the Arabic Translation Service, jobs that would have been contracted out were processed in-house. In the Chinese Translation Service, jobs were assigned to more qualified contractors, with particular attention paid to their mastery of the required subject matter, which is a prerequisite for quality. Given the success of this pilot, the operations of the

Contractual Translation Unit in New York will be integrated into the individual translation services and the Executive Office. To increase harmonization and the potential for workload sharing, common quality control standards for external translation work were adopted by all four duty stations. A quality control module for contractual editing was also incorporated into the contractual management application.

IV. Workload and staffing

A. Productivity, workload of revisers and workload sharing

1. Productivity

37. Table 1 shows the productivity, in terms of output in words per day per staff member, in the translation services at all four duty stations. The productivity of the translation services has generally increased, especially in the past two years, thanks to the introduction of new working methods and technologies. The figures in table 1 represent the effort of individual staff members and do not fully reflect the efficiency gains achieved through the use of eLUNa and increased self-revision. The Secretariat intends to review the productivity measurement methodology so that it reflects both individual effort and the efficiency gains generated by the use of technologies, including computer-assisted translation.

Table 1
Translation productivity, 2011-2016

(Words per staff member per day)

Duty station	*2012*	*2013*	*2014*	*2015*	*2016*
New York	1 530	1 596	1 506	1 656	1 819
Geneva	1 566	1 533	1 468	1 645	1 741
Vienna	1 429	1 492	1 551	1 725	1 798
Nairobi	1 590	1 449	1 505	1 346	1 340

2. Workload of revisers

38. In response to the request made by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (see A/71/549, para. 14) for information on the workload of revisers for the six translation services with respect to previous years to be provided in future reports on the pattern of conferences, an overview of the annual translation output that was revised by the language services of New York and Geneva in the period from 2014 to 2016, which accounted for just under 90 per cent of translation output during that period, is presented in table 2.

Table 2
Revision workload of translation services, by language, 2014-2016

(Number of words revised)

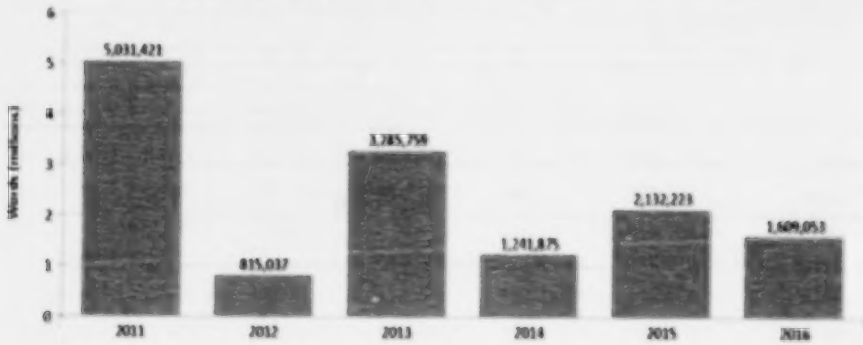
	2014		*2015*		*2016*	
	Geneva	*New York*	*Geneva*	*New York*	*Geneva*	*New York*
Arabic	4 760 095	9 438 942	4 236 931	10 477 425	3 424 687	9 447 191
Chinese	2 188 280	7 022 266	2 282 340	6 836 475	3 008 284	7 130 439
English	2 105 956	543 249	2 346 653	633 481	1 649 589	873 342
French	5 915 440	4 990 363	5 117 610	7 073 286	7 226 111	7 924 125
Russian	5 273 776	4 234 129	5 145 611	4 615 050	5 966 459	3 813 751
Spanish	5 966 805	4 384 244	6 750 897	4 638 925	7 653 825	5 498 698
Total	**26 210 352**	**30 613 193**	**25 880 042**	**34 274 642**	**28 928 965**	**34 687 544**

39. The proportion of translation output that is revised depends on the nature of the documents submitted for translation and the experience and availability of revisers, self-revising translators and, in some cases, temporary staff, who have the language combinations and specialized knowledge required. The services accordingly assign work for translation subject to revision or for self-revision, ensuring that the criteria of quality and timely delivery are met in the most efficient manner possible.

3. Workload sharing

40. The volume of workload sharing among the duty stations is shown in figure VIII. The surge in 2011 was due to the one-time transfer of documentation backlog from the United Nations Office at Geneva to New York. The increase in 2013 was the result of the transfer of the processing of pre-session documents of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women from Geneva to New York. The processing of such documents is now fully integrated into the latter's workload and no longer counted as workload sharing. The total amount shared in 2016 was 1.6 million words. Although this amount is 25 per cent less than in 2015, procedures were put in place to optimize the potential for workload sharing in the future so that workload sharing takes place when and where it matters most. Documents management teams at the various duty stations now consult regularly (on a monthly or bimonthly basis) to arrange workload sharing. In addition, the sharing of the editing workload began in 2016, when the Division of Conference Management in Geneva edited approximately 179,000 words for New York and approximately 18,000 words for Nairobi. In turn, New York edited approximately 107,000 words for Geneva. However, concurrent activity peaks across the Secretariat may limit its ability to consistently take advantage of workload sharing opportunities year-round.

Figure VIII
Workload sharing among duty stations, 2011-2016



B. Vacancies

41. The vacancy rates by duty station in key occupational groups as at 31 December 2016 are presented in table 3, with the 2015 figures presented for comparison in table 4. In nearly all cases, the vacancy rates fell. The number of vacancies in text processing at Headquarters reflects a temporary surge caused by a combination of factors that were addressed in early 2017, and a quarter of those vacancies were filled by April that year. All the translation and text-processing posts in Nairobi were filled by the end of 2016, although the interpretation vacancy rate there remained high, largely due to the lack of P-4 posts and hence of a career path for interpreters at the duty station.

Table 3
Vacancy rates in key occupational groups by duty station as at 31 December 2016

	Headquarters		*Geneva*		*Vienna*		*Nairobi*	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Interpretation services	8	6	8	8	0	0	7	37
Translation services	45		9	5		5	0	0
Text-processing units	24	20	9	10	1	3	0	0 (9)
Editorial control/terminology and referencing	1	3	1	5	1	17	N/A	N/A
Verbatim Reporting Service	4	8	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total	**82**		**27**	**7.1**	**4**	**3.7**	**7**	**11.3**

Abbreviation: N/A, not applicable.

Table 4
Vacancy rates in key occupational groups by duty station as at 31 December 2015

	Headquarters		*Geneva*		*Vienna*		*Nairobi*	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Interpretation services	10	8	0	0	1	4	5	25
Translation services	37	12	11	6	2	5	5	22
Text-processing units	11	9	7	6	1	3	2	9
Editorial control/ terminology and referencing	7	13	3	14	1	14	N/A	N/A
Verbatim Reporting Service	3	6	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total	**68**	**10.4**	**21**	**5.1**	**5**	**4.6**	**12**	**17.9**

Abbreviation: N/A, not applicable.

C. Recruitment

42. Several innovations aimed at improving the efficiency, effectiveness and accessibility of the Secretariat's activities to replenish recruitment rosters and fill language posts were introduced in 2016.

1. Recruitment testing

43. Five language competitive examinations were held, and these, together with the last examination held at the end of 2015, resulted in 79 language professionals being rostered for subsequent recruitment in 2016. Building on the successful piloting of remote testing and interviewing in the examinations for English translators and editors in 2015, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management held its first fully remote, online competitive examination in 2016. Remote testing makes the recruitment process far more accessible to candidates who for financial, physical or other personal circumstances find it difficult to travel to test centres. The examination chosen for the pilot was the one for Spanish translators. To make it even more accessible to candidates in more regions, the third language requirement was waived for holders of university degrees in translation. In addition, a vigorous outreach campaign was conducted to encourage potential candidates to sit the examination, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean. As a result, the number of applicants reached a record high of 4,777, almost five times the figures recorded in previous years. The 3,569 applicants who met the requirements were invited to sit the exam. Gratifyingly, the proportion of applicants from Latin America increased from 19 per cent to 58 per cent, and the proportion of successful candidates from Latin America increased from 6 per cent to 22 per cent.

44. The testing platform for this first fully remote language competitive examination was developed in collaboration with the Office of Human Resources Management, for whom the shift to remote testing represents considerable savings. The administration costs associated with the pen-and-paper tests held in 2012-2015 ranged from $1,100 to $1,700 per successful candidate and represented outlays of between $40,000 and $100,000 per year. In comparison, the fully remote online examination held in 2016, for Spanish translators, incurred no such administration costs. The first part of the examination, as in previous examinations, included three translation exercises, but this time they were completed using text-processing software and with access to the resources that translators routinely use in their work.

The second part, which was also conducted remotely, included proctored translation exercises and a competency-based interview. Feedback from test takers on the new, remote format was highly positive. Building on this success, all the language competitive examinations for translators, translators/précis-writers, editors, verbatim reporters and production editors in 2017 will be held remotely and apply the lessons learned, including with regard to the use of social media to inform and attract potential candidates. In addition, in order to achieve efficiencies of scale and increase the flexibility and mobility of staff (and hence the possibility of workload sharing), the recruitment of these language professionals will, as of 2017, be done through combined examinations, whereby successful candidates are placed on a single roster for subsequent recruitment and loan or transfer to any of these functional areas. Steps were also taken to match the assignment of new recruits with the specialization of different duty stations.

45. In addition to the competitive examinations held to fill rosters, 139 ad hoc tests were organized to recruit temporary freelance staff. Freelance contracts serve as excellent training for younger language professionals, who often go on to sit the language competitive examinations.

2. Outreach to potential recruits

46. Outreach to potential recruits expanded considerably in 2016. The network of universities that have signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations on training language professionals continues to be a strong source of new recruits. The proportion of successful candidates in the 2016 language competitive examinations that were graduates from such universities remained high, at 42 per cent, compared with 57 per cent in 2015. The possibility of offering associate membership to select universities is being explored, particularly in the case of universities in underrepresented regions that do not meet all the criteria for a memorandum of understanding, but have the potential to develop suitable programmes and candidates for the United Nations language services.

47. Outreach to universities in underrepresented regions expanded, as part of both the promotion of the language competitive examinations and the Pan-African Masters Consortium in Interpretation and Translation. The latter is a project co-funded by the European Commission and United Nations Office at Nairobi with a view to preparing highly qualified African conference interpreters and translators to meet the needs of the African market. Two of the six universities involved are also members of the memorandum of understanding universities network, and the Consortium secretariat coordinates regularly with the focal points of the United Nations universities outreach programme of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. As at 31 December 2016, the Consortium was supporting 125 students through scholarships to cover tuition fees and grants for work placements, as well as 34 trainers through exchange visits, and four PhD research projects. During the year, Consortium funds were used to support train-the-trainer workshops, attendance at meetings of the Executive Committee of the Consortium, facilities maintenance and the procurement of specialized equipment.

3. Training of potential recruits

48. The internship programme of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management has also expanded, with 22 language services hosting 220 young professionals on internships, traineeships and short practicums, compared with 23 services and 117 young professionals in 2015. The most notable increase was in the arrangement of silent-booth practice sessions for interpretation students. Building on the success of the remote coaching provided by services to translation students in previous years, a remote internship was piloted in 2016 and 2017 with a

student from Belgrano University in Argentina, with a view to expanding work experience opportunities to more young professionals in underrepresented regions.

49. Traineeships were organized in New York for Arabic and French interpreters to mitigate the short supply of such interpreters, with great success. Eight of the ten participants in the Arabic traineeship went on to pass the language competitive examinations for Arabic interpreters, and one of the six in the French traineeship went on to pass the competitive examination for French interpreters, with the other five passing the freelance test, which qualified them to occupy temporary positions. The participants had all been carefully selected and contracted at the P-1 level for the duration of the traineeships (five months and three months, respectively). Six staff interpreters were assigned as trainers. In-house trainceships for English and Russian interpreters have been organized in 2017.

4. Increased use of social media and improved social media presence

50. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management has continued to increase its use of social media to raise awareness of career opportunities in conference services at all duty stations. It has multiplied its reach by diversifying its presence on social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Google+ and flickr), expanding coverage in all official United Nations languages and developing methods of work resulting in more consistent branding, enhanced brand recognition and greater engagement with the public. This translated into more visits to the Department United Nations language careers website, including from 6,453 new users, and a rapid expansion of the Department's audience in most languages.

V. Improving conference services and their accessibility

A. Use of United Nations premises in New York

51. Requests to use United Nations premises in New York for special events, such as concerts and film screenings, have risen dramatically in recent years. The hours taken up by such events soared from 71 in 2014, to 202 in 2015 and 555 in 2016, placing a huge additional burden on meetings management staff. To prevent interference with the proceedings of intergovernmental processes and to protect meeting rooms from wear and tear, the Central Planning and Coordination Division at Headquarters worked with all departments concerned on a new request approval policy, whereby special events must (a) be in full compliance with the purposes and principles of the United Nations; (b) be strictly non-commercial in nature; (c) not alter the layout of rooms without the prior permission of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management; and (d) normally be held in one particular room and on weekends or after business hours on weekdays. A note verbale has been sent to the Permanent Missions of the Member States notifying them of the new policy. In addition, a costing and charging mechanism for such events, to fund the extra maintenance of the conference rooms and staffing needs they generate, will be developed in conjunction with the Department of Management in order to ensure that the core functions of servicing the Organization's official meetings are not affected. The administrative instruction entitled "Use of United Nations premises for meetings, conferences, special events and exhibits" (ST/AI/416), dated 26 April 1996, which guides the use of United Nations premises, must be revised

accordingly after the launch of the "one-stop shop" for conference service requesters, scheduled for 2017, in order to incorporate the new guidelines.[2]

B. The e-deleGATE portal

52. A suite of e-services is being developed to streamline procedures, reduce the costs and environmental impact of meetings and generally increase the efficiency of conference services, as well as enhance the experience for participants. These will be made available through the new, user-friendly e-deleGATE portal, which is replacing decades-old paper-based processes. The first set of these services were introduced in 2016, namely: eAccreditation, eSpeakers (for the general debate, General Assembly plenary meetings and meetings of the main committees of the General Assembly) and eSponsorship (for draft resolutions for main committees and plenaries). Those scheduled for implementation in 2017 include: eCorrespondence, eBlueBook, eRegistration and eList of participants/eMembership.

C. Accessibility

53. The Secretariat continued to provide sign language interpretation, Braille embossing and closed captioning to the bodies entitled to such services in New York and Geneva and to the extrabudgetary clients that requested and funded them. It also continued to lend assistive devices to meeting participants from its stock at the Accessibility Centre at Headquarters. In May 2016, the stock was upgraded through a generous donation from the Government of the Republic of Korea. A temporary accessibility kiosk was operated in the visitors' lobby during the main part of the General Assembly session. In addition, steps were taken to standardize the planning and recruitment of sign language interpretation teams to service the meetings entitled to sign interpretation and to increase the pool of qualified sign language interpreters, which is extremely limited. Work was done by the duty stations to establish shared rosters to cover demand, and informal consultations were initiated to lay the groundwork for applying the Agreement between the United Nations Common System/Chief Executives Board for Coordination and the International Association of Conference Interpreters to sign language interpreters.

54. The Secretariat is committed to mainstreaming accessibility considerations in its work and operations. In April 2016, it was decided that a course would be charted towards improving the accessibility of conference services at all four duty stations based on a common approach, including common technological arrangements and formats, operating standards, costing models, conditions of service and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The Secretariat coordinates its efforts within the Interdepartmental Task Force on Accessibility and other conference services providers through the International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications, to remain abreast of the latest developments in the field, and its accessibility focal points maintain regular contact with representatives of organizations of persons with disabilities.

55. With regard to physical facilities, increased accessibility is a feature of both the capital master plan at Headquarters and the strategic heritage plan in Geneva, and future renovations at the United Nations offices in Nairobi and Vienna are expected to improve the accessibility of their conference facilities as well. It is recommended that the accessibility of conference facilities be discussed under the

[2] The "one-stop shop" system will provide a single entry point for requesting meeting services, with an easy-to-use self-service interface and streamlined processes that will enhance coordination among all service providers at Headquarters.

agenda items relevant to the maintenance of United Nations premises and not in the context of the pattern of conferences.

VI. Measuring the quality of conference services

A. Feedback from users of conference services

56. The Department is committed to providing high-quality conference services to Member States in an efficient and cost-effective manner. To measure this, it collects feedback from Member States through global e-surveys, annual informational meetings and ad hoc surveys organized by each duty station. The e-survey is user-friendly, available year-round and designed to capture feedback from Member States on common indicators with respect to meeting services, translation and interpretation services and the overall quality of conference services at the four duty stations. Globally, 93 per cent of the survey respondents rated the conference services provided as either "good" or "very good".

57. Also, to complement the e-survey, additional information and ratings were collected on technical secretariat services in New York and from six selected meetings in Geneva, where more than 92 per cent of the 144 respondents also provided "good" or "very good" overall ratings. The United Nations Office at Nairobi carried out surveys for meetings held in Nairobi and Cairo, for which conference services were, once again, rated as "good" or "excellent" by 93 per cent of the respondents.

B. Informational meetings with delegations

58. Informational meetings held with representatives of permanent missions served to highlight developments in the provision of conference services and outline activities in recruitment and terminology management. Mission representatives at some meetings in New York stressed the need to strengthen quality control, modernize language use and fulfil the mandate for language parity. The informational meeting in Geneva included practical information on arranging conference services and ensuring that interpreters could faithfully render a delegate's statement in other languages. The increasing speed at which delegates deliver statements at official meetings seriously impinges on the Secretariat's ability to fulfil its mandate and provide quality interpretation, and all duty stations plan to continue to advocate with Member States to ensure that statements and interventions are delivered at the rate of no more than 100-120 words (or 200-240 syllables in Chinese) per minute. Participants at the meetings held by the United Nations Office at Vienna were encouraged to support its efforts to make more rational use of language service resources and to address specific queries and suggestions to the relevant language staff. Meetings with the committees of permanent representatives in Nairobi were used to present trends in the conference management service's performance indicators, outline challenges and clarify mandates and expectations.

VII. Conclusions, recommendations and proposed next steps

59. The Secretariat has responded swiftly and proactively to the challenges confronting its conference services, and the strategy of continuous improvement and modernization adopted by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management is producing the desired results in terms of the fulfilment of its mandate to ensure the quality, timeliness, cost-effectiveness, sustainability and

accessibility of the conference service it provides. The progress made in recent years on key indicators was sustained in 2016. All requests for meeting rooms were met, all but a fraction of requests for interpretation services were fulfilled, vacancy rates fell, and significant improvements were recorded in the timely processing, issuance and simultaneous distribution of documents. Moreover, the innovations piloted in recruitment testing, the management of contractual translation and the utilization of internal capacity are yielding positive results by generating greater efficiencies and have paved the way for continued progress in the months and years ahead.

60. In 2017 and beyond, the Secretariat will continue to engage actively with calendar bodies and author departments with a view to optimizing the utilization of meeting services and the planning of documentation processing.

61. Due to the magnitude and complexity of servicing 13,000 meetings every year at Headquarters, more than 10 major service providers in four departments are involved in providing requested services, which makes it necessary for clients to contact different service providers by e-mail or phone for the same meeting, fill out multiple forms with the same information, wait for separate confirmations and receive multiple bills, causing much inconvenience and frustration. The "one-stop shop" project, planned for roll-out in 2017, will provide a single entry point for requests for meeting services, with an easy-to-use, self-service interface for service requesters and a streamlined business process among all service providers as well as single billing. Upon its successful roll out at Headquarters, the system is also expected to be expanded to Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi at a later stage.

62. The United Nations Journal covers daily and forthcoming meetings at Headquarters. In order to facilitate the intergovernmental process through enhanced multilingualism and the use of information technology, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management is undertaking a Journal revamping project. The strategic business purpose of the project is to allow for the publication of the Journal in a way that meets, in the most cost-efficient manner, the multilingualism requirement stipulated in rule 55 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, namely the publication of the Journal in the six official languages year-round, and to provide better services to clients, making use of information technology. This would be achieved through a two-pronged approach: (a) standardizing content to enable the automation of translation, as much as possible, through the use of standard pre-translated text; and (b) leveraging technology to establish a fully electronic workflow and offer a more user-friendly experience through the development of a digital version (website and mobile application). Thanks to a robust web-based content management system, Journal-related business processes, including content submission, processing, translation and formatting, will be streamlined and automated as much as possible, leading to considerable efficiency gains.

63. The technical feasibility of piloting remote interpretation services, initially on a very limited scale, will also be examined with a view to increasing the availability of interpretation services and the utilization of in-house capacity across duty stations located in different time zones.

64. To continue to replenish and rejuvenate language capacity, outreach with universities and training institutions will continue, as funds permit, and traineeships and freelance contracts will be arranged for language professionals with priority language combinations. The fifth conference of universities that have signed memorandums of understanding with the United Nations was held at Headquarters in April 2017, and future such conferences will be used as a unique opportunity to strengthen collaboration with training partners and reach out to stakeholders. Together with the increased use of social media, the shift to fully remote testing,

successfully piloted in 2015 and 2016, will expand candidate pools and help to build healthy recruitment rosters. With a view to increasing the versatility of the workforce and reducing the number of examinations that must be organized, combined competitive examinations for all language functions — with the exception of interpreting — will be piloted. In addition, as indicated in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2018-2019 (A/72/6 (sect. 2), para. 2.19), the Editing Section will be merged with the English Translation Service in New York to facilitate cross-assignments, and the text-processing units will be redeployed to the translation services in order to ensure total alignment of priorities and optimize planning within the document processing chain. More flexible working and telecommuting arrangements for translators will be explored to enhance translation capacity in peak workload periods.

65. The automation of many research tasks through the deployment of eLUNa has not only made it possible to reassign reference and terminology staff to other support functions or abolish several posts, but allows translators in many cases to focus more on the task of translation per se, in other words, on accurately conveying the message of the original in, and according to the norms of, the target language. This means that junior translators can now develop the skills required to become self-revisers sooner. A proposed diamond-shaped staffing structure will therefore be submitted for approval in the budget for 2018-2019, to increase the number of self-revisers and at the same time balance translation capacity across languages, with due consideration given to language specificity.

66. In addition to the incorporation of the new eLUNa interface for editors, features to maximize the accessibility of the tool, especially for visually impaired users, will be pursued. The quality of eLUNa and the other language- and conference-management tools developed by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management has attracted the attention of other organizations in the United Nations system, some of which approached the Department in 2016 with requests for access to such tools. A project proposal will be submitted to the High-level Committee on Management of the Chief Executives' Board for Coordination to establish eLUNa as a common tool for translators in the United Nations system organizations on a cost-recovery basis.

Action recommended of the General Assembly

67. It is recommended that the General Assembly:

(a) Take note of the report;

(b) Urge those intergovernmental bodies whose average utilization of allocated conference services has been below the benchmark of 80 per cent to take this into account when planning their future sessions, with a view to achieving that benchmark;

(c) Encourage further harmonization of working methods across all duty stations, including the full implementation, improvement and mainstreaming of existing conference management systems.